

A newfound restlessness about the decadelong war in Afghanistan has reached the highest levels of the House Republican leadership, sparking serious concerns about war funding and murmurs about troop withdrawal — a sign that the GOP may be undergoing a shift in thinking about overseas intervention.

The new movement comes not just from conservative tea party members with an isolationist streak but from mainstream conservatives and moderates.

This week, Oregon Rep. Greg Walden told a meeting of top Republican leaders — which included Speaker John Boehner of Ohio and Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia — that he “had concerns that he was hearing from all over the country” about Afghanistan, according to a Republican lawmaker who was in the session.

According to the lawmaker, Walden didn’t say the U.S. should pull out of Afghanistan but that Republicans should be aware of these feelings in the GOP conference. Asked by POLITICO for details about his talk, Walden declined, saying it was in a closed meeting of top Republican leaders.

Boehner, both publicly and privately, has declared that he has no desire to see a U.S. pullout from Afghanistan or even a substantial drawdown in the size of the American combat force in that country. On Thursday, he said, “This is no time to back away from our engagement” in Afghanistan.

Yet the list of Republicans ready for a change in Afghanistan is surprising — and growing.

It includes Republicans— like Reps. Jason Chaffetz of Utah, **John Campbell of California** and John Duncan of Tennessee — who joined a handful of Democrats and anti-war North Carolina GOP Rep. Walter Jones in sending a letter to President Barack Obama this week urging him to “re-examine our policy of nation building in Afghanistan.”

Illinois Rep. Joe Walsh, a conservative Republican and tea party favorite, said he is not even sure that the war in Afghanistan is helping American efforts in the broader war on global terror.

"I come from a swing district," Walsh said, "a lot of blue-collar folks, and these are the most patriotic Americans in the world, and they're wondering what we're doing. There is a shift."

The new concern over Afghanistan is part of a growing war fatigue among a generation of Republicans that has for the past decade been largely in lock step over America's foreign wars. Long advocates of militarism and "peace through strength," more GOP lawmakers are now starting to go public with their concerns about what seems to be an endless, expensive war.

"We always say we need to stay to win and achieve victory," a GOP lawmaker said. "We're not totally sure what we mean by victory."

Still, many Republicans insist on anonymity when they express misgivings about the Afghanistan war, concerned they will look squishy on military action.

It's still too early to say how this will play out on Capitol Hill. Some lawmakers are discussing amendments to the Defense Appropriations bill to be considered later this summer that limits funding for the war, draws down troops or demands additional information from the Obama administration and Pentagon about the status of the campaign. President Barack Obama has already scheduled an internal review of the war by top administration and military officials this summer.

In turn, Boehner and top Republicans are reaching out to rank-and-file members so that "there are no surprises," when defense-related bills come to the floor this year, a top Republican aide said.

It is not a knee-jerk reaction to Osama bin Laden's death that has lawmakers demanding immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan. In fact, few want the U.S. to immediately leave Afghanistan. There is more a sense of fatigue stemming from a decade of war.

It's also coming from other, more moderate Republicans, who are home every two weeks seeing injured soldiers from the Middle East.

Rep. Cliff Stearns, a Republican who represents a conservative Florida district, said withdrawal should "begin immediately, sooner rather than later because of the deficit. The perception is we accomplished our mission."

"The reason is because of [bin Laden's] death; that was the original reason," Stearns told POLITICO. "But now that we got him, coupled with the huge deficit and cost of the war, I think a lot of people in my congressional district — including myself — think we should start looking at ways to save money and to use a Navy SEALs operation as an example of how to stop the Taliban instead of having [hundreds of thousands] of troops."

These kinds of statements have Armed Services Committee Chairman Buck McKeon (R-Calif.) worried. "There's enough angst about the budget and where we are — our fiscal problems — that I'm not surprised that people will come up with 'Well, we got to cut defense,'" McKeon told POLITICO.

"It's been 10 years," he said, acknowledging the feeling among his colleagues of an interminable war. "That's the longest time we've been engaged in a war as a nation, and you're bound to have some people just getting tired of it. But we paid a heavy price and to quit short of victory doesn't make sense to me."

Jones, who turned against the Iraq war early, is working to identify other Republicans who might join with him to push for an expedited withdrawal. FreedomWorks, an instrumental organization in the development of the tea party movement, provided him with a list of 11 freshmen who had shown an openness to adjusting the U.S. mission in Afghanistan during their 2010 campaigns.

Jones said he has also been meeting with advisers to find outside voices — perhaps celebrities or former military officers — who can help raise public awareness of the legislative effort to bring the war to a close.

“There are some members of the Republican Party that have asked me for the bill,” Jones told POLITICO on Thursday.

But the GOP leadership is not in the same place as these lawmakers. Boehner, a 20-year veteran of Washington, said Thursday that “we have a lot invested in Iraq and Afghanistan. And this is a time that we really ought to make sure that we take no action that would undermine all the progress that we’ve made.”

Boehner is clearly aware of the growing Republican sentiment to scale back the U.S. effort.

“Listen, having been involved in a lot of efforts here in Congress regarding military action overseas during my years in Congress — whether it was the first Gulf War, whether it was Serbia and Kosovo — clearly the length of time we’ve been in Iraq and Afghanistan, people grow weary,” Boehner said. “Whether it’s the American people, or frankly, members of Congress.”

Texas Rep. Pete Sessions, chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, said flatly that “now is the wrong time to begin talk of pulling out with the insinuation that the mission is accomplished.”

Once again, the House schedule is playing a big part in this debate. Several lawmakers said being home in their districts, watching wounded soldiers come home to their families, has cemented their concern over the war.

Walsh, the freshman from Illinois, said his unease with the war began during last year’s campaign and that seeing “boys come home almost every month, some maimed, some hurt” has taken a toll. People are “beginning to look at it again, and when you look at it, you do sort of scratch your head now and say ‘What are we doing?’”